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ABSTRACT

This article presents the difficulties literary pragmaticists have with literary genre, and asks to what extent linguists belonging to the Halliday tradition might be able to help. Literary pragmatists need a taxonomical apparatus that will apply to genres of all kinds, literary or otherwise. They also need to describe how different genres help people perceive and parcel things up, and how genres function within sociocultural contexts. It seems that Hallidayan linguists may well have something to suggest here, even if their genre thinking is not yet fully developed to their own satisfaction. Furthermore, literary pragmaticists need to talk about changes in genres and in their relation to context. Here it is not immediately clear whether Halliday linguists can help. The question is: Do Hallidayans, as a matter of either principle or convenient practice, confine themselves to a synchronic approach? (Contains 39 references.) (JL)

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by Roger D. Sell

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LITERARY GENRE AND HISTORY: QUESTIONS FROM A LITERARY PRAGMATICIST FOR SOCIO-SEMIOTICIANS

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1. Introduction: the nature of the questions to be posed

This paper amounts to a stage in an on-going enquiry. It presents the difficulties literary pragmaticists have with literary genre, and it asks to what extent linguists belonging to the Halliday tradition might be able to help.

Literary pragmaticists need à taxonomical apparatus which will apply to genres of all kind, literary or otherwise. Also, they need to describe how different genres help people perceive and parcel things up, and how genres function within sociocultural contexts. It seems that Hallidayan linguists may well have something to suggest here, even if their genre thinking is not yet fully developed to their own satisfaction.

Furthermore, however, literary pragmaticists also need to talk about *changes* in genres and in their relation to context. Here it is not immediately clear whether Halliday linguists can help. The question is: Do Hallidayans, as a matter of either principle or convenient practice, confine themselves to a synchronic approach?

2. The neo-classical decontextualization of literary genres

A full answer to the literary pragmaticist's questions about genre, then, would combine taxonomy, epistemology, function and diachrony, and this to a degree arguably not attempted since Aristotle's treatise on poetics. Yet not even Aristotle's account, at least in the form in which it has come down to us, succeeded in holding all this together, and neo-Aristotelians of the renaissance reduced genre to a matter of rigid formal prescription. In making taxonomy all-important in this particular way they tended to treat literary works as finished products. Yet rightly understood, any written text is only the merest trace of a whole process of communication, which takes place within a society that is for ever changing.

There is much that could be said in mitigation for the poeticians of the renaissance. Their decontextualizing genre prescriptions were supposed to help vernacular writers straightforwardly emulate the glories of Greece and Rome. Perhaps it was unfortunate that Aristotle's thought, diachronic though it was, was so much taken up with entelechy -- the idea of functions or potentialities gradually blossoming out into complete and perfect expression. Tragedy, he said, grew up little by little as its character became clear; after many transformations, it settled down when its nature was formed. All of which tended to portray Greek tragedy as

the only way to do things.

But the neoclassical uprooting of literary genres from sociohistorical contexts could only wrench the facts of communicative life. It made too little allowance for the influence of an author's particular audience on what he writes, and too little allowance for the impact the author might want to make, and indeed might make, upon his audience.

3. The modern emphasis on individual vision at the expense of genre

Other principled decontextualizations downplay things in only the one way or the other. Literary structuralism of the 1960's and 1970's announced the death of the author and the life of culture. More sensitive to variations in cultural conditions than neoclassicism was, it saw these as determining what kinds of work the writer can produce, who consequently had no individuality. The literary criticism of Harold Bloom (e.g. Bloom 1973), on the other hand, can be seen as reacting to structuralism, by declaring the life of authors and the death of culture. Out of anxiety that they might be influenced by some predecessor, strong authors strive to make everything new in their own way.

Of these two oversimplifications Bloom's is the more typically modern: it is somewhat more likely to strike people born after, say, 1780 as common sense. Admittedly there are partial precedents, both ancient

and neoclassical. Longinus, speculating on the nature and origins of the sublime -- that quality in a text which overwhelms us with the feeling that here is "the real thing" --, concluded that a great writer can infringe rules of writing with impunity; he who follows rules can actually seem to lack sincerity and emotional conviction. And after Boileau had translated Longinus into French such sentiments were repeated in accounts of Shakespeare as an untaught genius and in Pope's "Essay on Criticism". Longinus also said, however, that the sublime comes and goes as suddenly as a flash of lightening; for the most part a writer has to rely on existing conventions as a sustaining prop, for which reason they deserve to be catologued and taught. And for Pope sublime originality and inherited norms were in rich symbiosis. It was only as the eighteenth century moved into the early Romantic period that the more radically Bloomian notes began to be sounded. In 1759 Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* argued:

> All eminence and distinction lies out of the beaten road; excursion and deviation are necessary to find it; and the more remote your path from the highway, the more reputable .... Rules, like crutches, are a needful aid to the lame, though an impediment to the strong. (Young 1918: 11-12, 14)

In 1783 Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* stood entelechy on its head: the most highly developed forms of genres may represent a falling-off in sheer power:

> In the rude and artless strain of the first poetry of all nations, we ... often find somewhat that captivates and transports the mind.
> (Blair 1965: II 322-3)

And it is with Coleridge and Wordsworth that the modern attitude becomes entirely a matter of course. The be-all and end-all now is quite simply poetry -- supreme powers of creative expression. Compared with this, the question of what particular form of writing an author chooses is a mere irrelevance. As Wordsworth put it:

> Why trouble yourself about the species till you have previously decided upon the genus? Why take pains to prove that an ape is not a Newton, when it is self-evident that he is not a man?
> (Wordsworth 1952: 403)

In some of the most influential aesthetic theories of the present century such views have been of fundamental importance. For Benedetto Croce, every true work broke generic laws, and a preoccupation with formal classifications was positively dangerous: it represented a blindness to intuitive knowledge. The New Critics, seeking to show the tensions, paradoxes and ironies by which truly imaginative works reconcile, in Coleridge's phrase, opposite and discordant qualities, were similarly unconcerned about genres. And so, despite his elaborate typologies, is Northrop Frye: his typologies are of intuited mythical structures which permeate many different kinds of writing throughout the ages.

The whole tendency of the Romantic tradition of which Bloom is the

latest representative is in fact to dispense with generic taxonomy, social context and history at a stroke. Of the Aristotelian quartet of interests, they leave us with epistemology only: their main stress is on the great author's access to a special truth, something which can set him quite apart from normal conventions, from society, from his own historical period. We may well be tempted to say that, under the circumstances, the deconstructionists' scepticism towards any notion of truth, or the literary structuralists' cultural determinism, is a salutory antidote.

4. Rehabilitations

4.1. Recent genre criticism

But there have also been less extreme and, as I believe, more helpful countermoves. For one thing there has been a quiet revival of genre criticism. The finest representative of this is Alastair Fowler's *Kinds of Literature*, 1982. Fowler offers a genre taxonomy which is historical and which has a whole new range and flexibility. Although he modestly claims to focus mainly on English literature, he offers a vast sweep in both historical and geographical dimensions, and he registers with unprecedented force and clarity the way in which genres are for ever interpenetrating each other and so being modulated into new forms and potentials. In all this he has something like Pope's sense of the

symbiosis between cultural inheritance and originality: the modulations he observes are within and by means of genres, but they are brought about by individuals. At the same time, however, he also develops some hints given in E.D. Hirsch's account of literary hermeneutics (Hirsch 1967, 1976). Whereas previous scholars had centred almost entirely on the writer's end of things, proposing ways in which genre has either helped or hindered him, Fowler stresses that the cultural reality of genres is a positive help to readers. As they get to grips with a text, they pragmatically contextualize it within the cultural frame of reference of which genres are a major part. And in listing fifteen different dimensions along which literary genres can be classified, Fowler is careful to include some which are not merely internal features of style, character, plot motif and so on. He also gives some recognition to the relationships between genres and particular occasions, to the kind of interpersonal relations they entail, and -- in keeping with his hermeneutic interest -- to the type of task involved for the reader.

4.2. Recent contextualizing approaches to literature

In this Fowler comes close to several other types of contemporary scholarship, all of them in various ways attempting to relate literary texts to contexts of writing and reading. Sometimes within a Marxist

framework, there is much discussion of how certain texts, as the result of socio-cultural forces, come to be designated as literary in the first place (e.g. Eagleton 1983: 1-16). "New" historians (e.g. Greenblatt 1980) are developing fascinating and unexpected aspects of the consubstantiality of literary texts with the cultures in which they are written and read, and even the more traditional historical approach is renewing itself, not least by establishing closer links between the tasks of the bibliographer and the critic: the literary text's circumstances of publication are being brought into the very centre of the interpretative arena (e.g. McGann 1985). Somewhat similarly, *Rezeptionsästhetik* is relativising the significance of literary works to the horizons of expectations of particular audiences (e.g. Jauss 1982), while German and Dutch empirical literary scientists are busily testing the responses of real readers to particular texts (e.g. Schmidt 1982). Again, the West's discovery of Bakhtin (e.g. Bakhtin 1983) is leading to insights into relationships between the languages of literature and the wide range of sociolects -- the "hetero-glossia" -- operative within any language community.

5. Literary pragmatics

This, too, is where we come to literary pragmatics, in which the stress on context is partly a way of qualifying the extreme epistemological

scepticism of deconstruction. Literary pragmatics accepts that the relationship between the two halves of the sign is arbitrary and unstable, but sees the process of semiosis as for ever freezing in its tracks, so that communication can nevertheless take place and things be done in the world. It is alive to the pragmatic conventions by which words and actions in a given milieu are usually interpreted, and is much more interested than deconstruction in the non-ideational, social dimensions of language and literature. Unlike deconstruction, in other words, it is not greatly sceptical of the existence of language-external realities, particularly as regards the world of other people. It strives, rather, to bring out the interpersonality of literary activity. So if deconstruction was strongly epistemological, literary pragmatics combines epistemology with sociocultural history.

This means that literary pragmatics is in line with the contextualizing types of literary scholarship already mentioned. But as will already be apparent it is also attuned to recent advances in linguistics. More and more linguists are coming to see entire processes of production and reception as specific to particular sociocultural, situational and interactional circumstances. This trend towards contextualization can be traced in speech-act theory, discourse and conversation analysis, pragmatics, anthropological linguistics, functional linguistics, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics.

Literary pragmatics incorporates the contextualizing insights of both linguists and literary scholars, and in doing so seeks to circumvent one of the main stumbling blocks to previous attempts to bring linguistics and poetics closer together. From the Russian Formalists onwards, it has often been argued that language is the material from which literature is made, and that literary categories are therefore predetermined by, and even coextensive with, hard-core linguistic categories. Taken to extremes, this resulted in those "bottom-up" analyses of literary texts which loaded every phoneme with definite artistic significance. Linguists could easily tire of it, since it involved little more than exhaustive descriptions. Literary scholars could easily feel that it represented a positivism blind to larger and more subtle organizations and effects, including some of those in which language played a significant part. The promise of literary pragmatics, on the other hand, lies in its inclusion of a "top-down" perspective from the very start. Drawing on Enkvist's processualism (Enkvist 1991), Bakhtin's sociological poetics (Bakhtin 1981), and Roger Fowler's account of literature as social discourse (Fowler 1981), it sees the writing and reading of literary texts as interactive communication processes which, even though they are not face-to-face, one-to-one or contemporaneous, are inextricably linked, like all such processes, with the particular sociocultural contexts within which they take place. It takes for granted that no account of communication

in general will be complete without an account of literature and its contextualization, and that no account of literature will be complete without an account of its employment of the communicative resources generally available.

In short, it is *not* basically a type of literary scholarship which borrows theories and techniques from a separate discipline of linguistics, and it is *not* basically a type of linguistic scholarship which uses literary texts as examples. It aspires to be at one and the same time both literary and linguistic. It centres on what we have come to call literary texts, but it does not fundamentally distinguish the communication between literary writers and their readers from any other type of language communication. Poetics and linguistics come together in a common concern with contextualization.

6. Genres in literary pragmatic thought: four problems for a contextualizing account

This is not the place for a full account of the scope of literary pragmatics (for which, see Sell 1991(b) and Sell forthcoming(a)), but it will already be partly apparent that a main concern is to develop a sociocultural definition of literature. I myself have sometimes gone to the point of nominalism: a literary text is a text which is designated as literary within a certain milieu. But we clearly need something more

subtly compartmentalized than this. Alastair Fowler's work has already begun to show that genres are central to the pragmatics of literary production and reception, a point which other contemporary genre scholars have developed in ideological terms: each genre has its own ideological loading, which in parody and genre modulation are played off against each other (cf. Dubrow 1982: 115-118). Literary pragmaticists need a way of distinguishing one genre from another which at the same time will reflect the consubstantiality of particular instances with their sociocultural circumstances of production and reception. And this is where four fundamental problems arise.

6.1. Changes in genres

First, as I said at the beginning, the account must be able to deal with changes in genres over time. Especially after Alastair Fowler's work, the fact that they do change is not in dispute. Any new account of them must take cognizance of the tension at any given time between their relative stability and relative instability, suggest human and social reasons for this, and show its pragmatic consequences in processes of communication. In this last connection, the literary pragmaticist will argue that genre acts like any other temporary social convention serving to freeze semiosis in its tracks so as to allow things to be said and done

in the world.

6.2. Individual versus culture

Secondly, there is the question of the individual versus the culture, which of course is a fundamental problem in philosophy. I have already cited several instances of both the extreme positions in this debate, and more than hinted at my own preference for a position which may be attacked as a precariously naive piece of fence-sitting, neither neo-classical nor modern, neither cooly scientific nor liberal humanist.

It really does seems to me that there are individuals, that they can choose, and that they can also do new things. (I am aware that what I am calling individuality may also be determined, genetically. But I leave that on one side.) And then there is culture, and culture certainly does entail frameworks and exert pressures. Croce, up to a point, is right: every true work breaks generic laws. But how would its truth be either constituted or recognized if there were not generic laws for it to break? There is much that is still suggestive in the way the Russian Formalists extended their concept of artistic defamiliarization from language to genre -- for instance in Shklovsky's essay of 1921 on *Tristram Shandy* (Shklovsky 1965) --, an approach to which Mukarovsky, in 1936, added a social framework (Mukarovsky 1970) which deserves to

be better known.

6.3. Historically specific versus universal

Thirdly, the contextualizing account of genres will have to make allowance for combinations of more than one kind of contextual factor. It will have to conceive of context at one and the same time broadly and narrowly, with both lesser and greater degrees of historical specificity. In a way, this point is analogous to the previous point about culture versus individual, and here too we have yet another fundamental philosophical problem about the nature of man. If, as I believe, man is partly socially conditioned and partly individual, is that all? Is everything in him that is not culturally determined individual? Or is there also a second kind of determination? (Again I do not mean his personal genetic coding.) Do some of his features also stem from a universally programmed human psyche -- from, in old-fashioned language, an unchanging human heart?

Once again, I may be attacked as a fence-sitter. I believe that it is not true to say that people in one culture can never have the faintest idea of what people in other cultures feel. And I also believe that people in different cultures can never feel the same things *exactly*. Some genres -- panegyrics on the king's birthday, for example -- actually seem more strongly conditioned by cultural circumstance. Others -- tragedy, for

instance -- seem of far wider applicability. Yet the way a genre functions can always involve, I believe, a compounding interplay between a universal humanity and particular historical formations.

6.3.1. The function of genres: a theoretical retrospect

This third problem has a long history in literary thought. Ideas about how genres function have ranged from the universalizing to the historically very specific. Because the problem is so central to the thrust of my present questioning, a brief theoretical retrospect may be in order, after which it may also be easier to present the fourth problem.

To begin with the universalizing kind of account, we must again return to Aristotle. Aristotle suggested that the origins of artistic imitation lie in man's delighted curiosity for knowledge, and that the main effect of tragedy is catharsis -- the purgation of pity and fear. Clearly his analysis here is far from its most historical or political. Rather, he speaks of man's psyche as universally and eternally the same, and as if the only things to be curious about, and to be pitied and feared, came either from the gods or as the result of a man's own personal flaws of character. This suppresses historically institutionalized injustice in the way entailed by Aristotle's own particular ideological formation and power base as, among other things, tutor to the conqueror of the known world. The

social discriminations he does make are mainly in the question of subject-matter: comedy contains low characters, tragedy high characters. And the only connection of this with his functional theory is his claim that *all* men will feel pity and terror at the sufferings of great men.

Even though *The Poetics* was not itself well known in the west until the fifteenth century, something very like Aristotle's account, including its gaps, has often been repeated. No less indiscriminately than post-Romantic critics looked for creative imagination in every genre, many pre-Romantic critics, when they spoke of function at all, saw all types of literature as conveying some knowledge or experience which was universally relevant. Horace's neat formula, *dulce et utile*, was seminal, and the medieval account of allegory was of course to much the same effect. In our own century, the idea that genres have a foundation in general human psychology has been put forward by Paul van Tieghem (1938): Each emotional taste, each social or religious need, is the root of a different genre which blossoms more or less happily. This kind of thinking was also very apparent in André Jolles' account (1972; first pub. 1930)) of simple forms, i.e. forms such as the myth, the joke or the riddle, which he said are as universal as human language, are intimately connected with the human process of organizing the world linguistically, and can underlie sophisticated literary works. As for the Aristotelian subsumption of social discriminations under internal content, the same

tendency can be seen in the so-called Wheel of Virgil, immensely influential during the later middle ages, and in the ingenious map of literature devised by Thomas Hobbes (see Figures One and Two). Even when, as regularly happened up until the Romantic period, the threefold style distinction included in such schemes was converted into a principle of decorum for the practising writer, the writer's own circumstances of work were still specified in the most general way. It was up to him to know what counted as occasions for high, medium or low style in his own culture.

From the Romantics onwards, we find a number of accounts of genre function whose terms of reference are intermediate between a universal humanity and a detailed sociocultural specificity. A genre is said to be the expression of a general need of a particular people during a certain period or of mankind in a certain phase of development. For Hegel (trans. 1975: II 1045) the epic reflected "the child-like consciousness of a people [who feel] no separation between freedom and will." For Nietzsche (1872) Greek tragedy arose when the austere harmony and comforting radiance of Appollonian culture was challenged by the darker knowledge and musical life-spirit of the Dionysiac. Brunetière (1890), in an exercise in literary Darwinism, linked the development of satire to the rise of the bourgeois spirit. For Malinowski (1923) the oral stories told by Trobrianders enhanced the solidarity of the group, for instance by

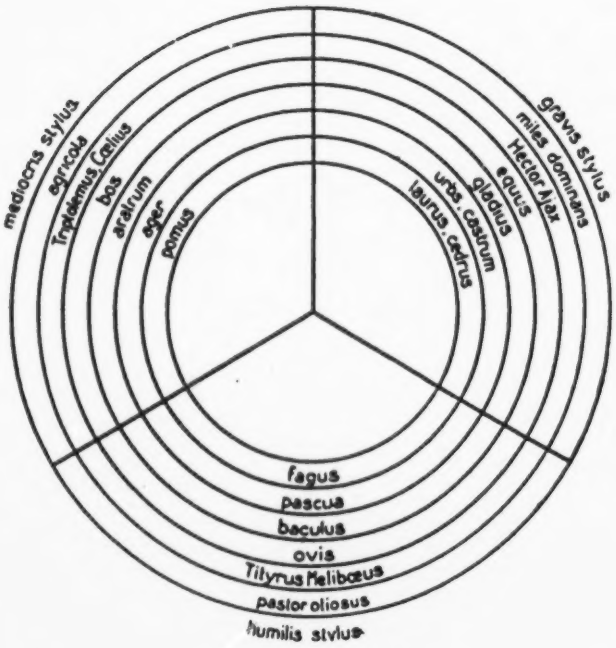

FIGURE ONE: THE WHEEL OF VIRGIL (from Fowler 1982: 240)

	NARRATIVE	DRAMATIC
Heroic COURT	EPIC POEM	TRAGEDY
Sconmatic CITY	SATIRE	COMEDY
Pastoral COUNTRY	BUCOLIC/PASTORAL	PASTORAL COMEDY

FIGURE TWO: THE SCHEME OF THOMAS HOBBES (cf. Spingarn 1908: II 55)

reminding them of the need for unity in face of famine. And for Walter Ong the performance of an oral epic can "serve simultaneously as an act of celebration, a *paedeia* or education of youth, as strengthener of group identity, as a way of keeping alive all sorts of lore -- historical, biological, zoological, sociological, venatic, nautical, religious -- and much else" (Ong 1982: 161).

Considerably more specific is the form-historical school of German protestant theology represented by Bultmann and Gunkel. This strongly stresses that each of the various genres to be found in the Bible stemmed from a very definite function or locus in life -- a typical situation or mode of behaviour in the life of the community (cf. Jauss 1982: 100--103). A remarkably similar approach is found in those renaissance poeticians who, unlike so many of their colleagues, did *not* decontextualize genres, and could sometimes be very specific indeed. I quote from the description given in George Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589) of an epithalamium. The first part of such a poem was sung

> at the first parte of the night, when the spouse and her husband were brought to their bed, & at the very chamber dore, where in a large vtter roome vsed to be (besides the musitiens) good store of ladies or gentlewomen of their kinsefolkes, & others who came to honor the marriage; & the tunes of the songs were very loude and shrill, to the intent there might no noise be hard out of the bed chamber by the skreeking and outcry of the young damosell feeling the first forces of her stiffe & rigorous young man, she being, as all virgins, tender & weake, and vnexpert in those maner of affaires. ... The tenour of that part of the song was to congratualate the first acquaintance and meeting of the young couple, allowing of their parents good discre-

> tions in making the match, then afterward to sound cherfully to the onset and first encounters of that amorous battaile, to declare the comfort of children, & encrease of love by that meane cheifly caused: the bride shewing her self euery waies well disposed, and still supplying occasions of new lustes and loue to her husband by her obedience and amorous embracings and all other allurements. (Smith 1904: 53-54)

6.4. Old genres in new contexts

The fourth problem to be faced by a literary pragmatic account of genre is that genres break free from their locus in life, and in two different senses.

First, new works can continue to be written in an old genre long after developments in sociocultural history have deprived the genre of its original specific function. This has been recognized even by Marxist literary sociologists, who no longer apply the theory of reflection in a simplistic way. They still find cases where the interdependence of social infrastructure and ideological superstructure accounts for literary forms, but they also say that literary genres, after the moment of their social formation, achieve a life of their own and an autonomy which reaches beyond their historical hour of fate, thus enjoying an anachronistic afterlife (cf. Jauss 1982:91).

Secondly, a particular work which was written when its genre was still closely linked to a locus in life often continues to be read and thus to

instantiate the genre in later ages when that locus no longer exists. John Stuart Mill drew a distinction between eloquence and poetry: that eloquence is heard, poetry is *over*heard. But obviously poetry is slightly less *over*heard by its first readers than by later ones, and eloquence too -- indeed *all* uses of language -- can be overheard, when experienced by listeners or readers not belonging to the audience originally envisaged. Linguists often talk as if all communication took place directly between the sender and the intended receiver. But by far the majority of the utterances we receive and process during the course of our lives are not directed to us specifically. Often we are anything but uncurious about them. And we often have a real sense of learning something from them, something important to ourselves. Nor is my echo here of Aristotle's account of the psychological attractions of artistic imitation fortuitous. Our assimilations and transmutations of the meaning of literary texts, our accommodations of their socioculturally and interpersonally not immediately relevant discourse to our own interests, find parallels in much of our other language reception.

When a literary genre breaks free of its original locus in either of these ways what function does it then have? Does it operate entirely at the level of the universal, appealing to an unchanging human heart? Does it take on some specifically social function that is new? Does it acquire an autonomously literary function of some sort? And all this

raises a still more general problem: We want to talk about the function of a literary genre, but function as defined in *whose* teleology? That of a writer actually working in the genre? Of the first readers of his work? Of later readers? Of subsequent national historians? Psychologists? Sociologists? Of literary critics in the twenty-second century? -- if there are any.

7. The socio-semiotic view of genre

As I have said, literary pragmaticists regard the writing and reading of literary texts as communication processes not essentially different from other such processes, and they try to draw on insights in current linguistic thought, particularly approaches which link linguistic expression to interaction. As far as I can gather, the top-down linguistics associated with Halliday might be of particular relevance since it makes the link between sociocultural function and textual manifestation so explicitly. More particularly, socio-semioticians operate with concepts such as contextual configuration and generic structure potential.

Figure Three is based on Ruqaiya Hasan's account of these (Halliday & Hasan 1985: 97-116). Hasan explains that a culture is expressed by the totality of what is meaningful and consists of semiotic systems that cover ways of being, saying and doing. These systems construct and

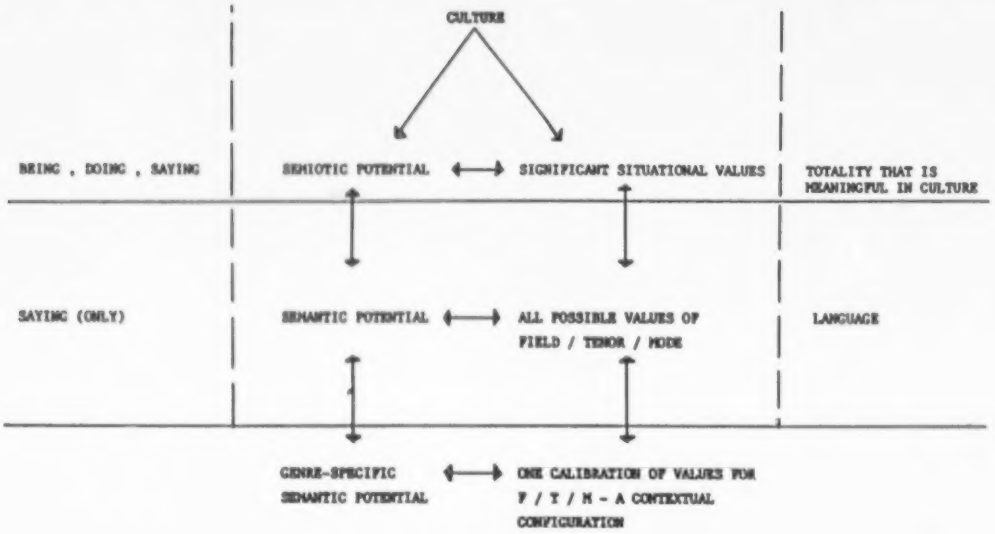
CULTURE
BEING , DOING , SAYING
SEMIOTIC POTENTIAL
SIGNIFICANT SITUATIONAL VALUES
TOTALITY THAT IS MEANINGFUL IN CULTURE
SAYING (ONLY)
SEMANTIC POTENTIAL
ALL POSSIBLE VALUES OF FIELD / TENOR / MODE
LANGUAGE
GENRE-SPECIFIC SEMANTIC POTENTIAL
ONE CALIBRATION OF VALUES FOR F / T / M - A CONTEXTUAL CONFIGURATION

FIGURE THREE: HASAN'S ACCOUNT OF GENRES (based on Halliday & Hasan 1985: 100)

make perceptiple significant situational values, which will provide the frame for the appropriate exchange of meanings: there is a bidirectional relation between situation and meanings. The meanings expressible by saying, and all the possible contexts of saying, come at the next level down in the diagram, and at the third level these are split up into genres for saying more specific things in more specific kinds of context. A particular contextual figuration of field, tenor and mode will be associated with a particular generic structure potential. What does not appear from Figure Three is that statements of generic structure potential distinguish between structural elements that are obligatory for the genre to perform its function, and elements that are optional. They also indicate any degree of flexibility possible in the ordering of elements. So a sales service encounter does not have to contain a greeting, and if there is an enquiry about the availability of goods this has to precede the transfer of goods. Then, of course, there would be a further level or further levels, at which the structural elements are realized in linguistic forms.

If I have understood it correctly, this account harmonizes in several respects with literary pragmatics. It would seem to cater for literary genres no less than for any other type of genre, to make them no less meaningful and communicative, and yet not reduce them to other genres. In the contextual configuration one could presumably include information to the effect that the communicator has chosen the tenor of a literary

writer (novelist, poet or whatever) and that his mode is correspondingly literary, and one could follow this through in describing the generic structure potential (roman à clef, love lyric or whatever) and the detailed linguistic realization. By the same token, literary genres, like other genres, would presumably have no less potential for interaction than specific ways of being and ways of saying. Herein, for me, lies the chief interest of the socio-semiotic approach, and I should like to know how it would deal with literary communication in more detail.

For one thing, I think this account might well be able to accommodate the observation that formed the basis of my third problem (section 6.3 above): the fact that genre functions may be non-unitary and range from the universal to the socioculturally more specific. It would be possible, I should have thought, to develop ways of talking about field and tenor which would take this into account. Unless I am mistaken, socio-semioticians already handle these two concepts in a common-sense and somewhat ad hoc manner rather than according to some rigid system.

Similarly, although this account does not provide answers to all the questions I raised under my fourth problem (section 6.4 above), it could surely accommodate the central observation that genres sometimes sit very loosely to their orginal locus in life. Under field one could presumably specify, where necessary, that the subject matter is of a kind that is no longer, in an immediate way, socioculturally active. And

where necessary, one could specify under tenor that the writer and reader lived in two different periods. In this way one could perhaps begin to recognize the facts of "overhearing".

As for my first two problems, on the other hand, the way genres change over time (section 6.1 above), and the tension between the individual and the culture (section 6.2 above), I suppose it would be quite misguided to expect an account such as Hasan's to be of help in its present form. The account is synchronic. For the purposes of structuralist analysis, it treats the potentialities for meaning, action, being and speech as if they formed a rigidly fixed grid. It is not concerned to show how the range of possibilities might be extended or limited. It tends to emphasize social formations and takes no stand at all on the question of free-will. There is no way of knowing whether its proponent is a philosophical determinist, and since, unlike literary pragmaticists, her interests here are not diachronic, her silence is unimpeachable.

All the same, her account of generic structure potential is already far from inflexible. There are, we have noted, optional as well as obligatory elements, so that the genre can already have a certain autonomy vis à vis its specific function. And when Eija Ventola (1987) turns a similar model into a flowchart for service encounters she indicates openings for mixing, embedding, switching, recursions, omissions and side-programming, which can give rise to sub-genres and a duality of roles for the

participants. In all this, the idea of the historical modulation of genres may be only just round the corner.

8. Genre modulation: an example

By way of conclusion, the topics on which I should particularly like to press my questions are: genre modulation; the problem of individual initiative; and the changing functions of a genre when particular instantiations of it break loose from their original locus in life. Can the socio-semiotic genre theory somehow be rotated from a synchronic plane to a diachronic one? Does the theory maintain an inflexible social determinism? How does the theory account for the "overhearing" of genres by people not belonging to the group of most directly envisaged recipients.

In order to concretize these issues, I should like to offer a few observations about two English poems, and to ask what the socio-semiotic theory would say about them. The poems are so well known that I shall not even need to reproduce their texts. But what certainly is now necessary -- and this in itself is relevant to the problem of "overhearing" -- is a few words about their original contexts.

By 1854, British cavalry regiments were often criticised for being old-fashioned and unsoldierly, less interested in fighting than in flaunting a

handsome, lady-killing appearance in their splendid uniforms. But then, during the Crimean War, a shocking event took place. A body of cavalry was ordered, by mistake, to make a charge at a body of artillery. To carry out the order was to ride straight into almost certain death. And that is what six hundred men did. The event was widely reported in the press, and Tennyson wrote "The Charge of the Light Brigade" and sent it to a newspaper for publication.

Sixty-two years later, by Easter 1916, the First World War had already been under way for nearly one and a half years. By then, too, the cause of Irish nationalism had its roll of martyrs -- Fitzgerald, Emmet, Wolf Tone, Parnell, O'Leary --, but had also bourn fruit in the Home Rule Bill of 1913. One person who had rather ambivalent feelings about the cause was W.B. Yeats. He was personally impressed by O'Leary, he admired Lady Gregory and other great landowners for patronizing the arts in Ireland, and he saw the peasantry as a rich source of imagination and mythology. But he despaired at the money-grubbing small-mindedness of the Irish middle class, and wrote a poem, "September 1913", satirizing their refusal to build an art gallery to house a collection of Impressionist paintings offered as a gift to Dublin by Sir Hugh Lane. When the First World War broke out, the implementation of Home Rule was shelved, and rumours started to circulate that England would not keep faith. Then, while the battle of the Somme was dragging on, came the Easter

Rising, in which a group of Irish patriots, with German support, tried to take control of Dublin. They were forcefully repressed by England, so that the cause gained new martyrs, and at this point Yeats added a note to "September 1913" to the effect that the poem now seemed out of date. He also wrote a new poem, "Easter 1916".

I shall not attempt to formalize the cultural configurations, but the two situations clearly have much in common. Tennyson and Yeats both felt that the reputation of a maligned group of people needed reconsideration after their heroic action and death. If we think in socio-semiotic terms of the potentials for being, saying, and doing, the two poets have made similar choices. They have not decided to *do* something, such as assassinating the British Prime Minister. They have decided to *say* something, in writing (to gain greater clarity and permanence), in print (to gain publicity), and poetically (to draw still more attention to itself).

Both poems are about the death of the brave people, but if one had only read Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade" one might well assume that it is more or less definitive for the genre involved. In many ways it certainly does consummate the entire tradition of lamentation about which Peter Levi has written so eloquently (Levi 1991: 5-26).

In the flexible spirit of Hasan's model, but using the term "features" to refer to both her level of "elements" and the level of linguistic realization, we could easily imagine that some features of this kind of

poem would be optional or alternative. It could be written in a high style reminiscent of an epic, or in a low style reminiscent of a ballad; or, like the poem Tennyson actually wrote, it could be a mixture of the two. Again, the poem could have considerable length or, like Tennyson's poem, be shortish. And presumably the heroic action could either be particularized to the deeds of individuals or, as in Tennyson, treated in a more general way as the behaviour of an entire group of characters. Some things, though, one would surely expect to be obligatory. The heroic action would have to *be* narrated. It would have to be narrated in the third person, singular or plural. The value of the heroic deed would have to be responded to as straightforwardly unquestionable. And the style would correspondingly be one of plain, if not unemotional statement.

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" in fact became so well known that it was bound to enter into intertextual relationships with anything Yeats might have written in his later situation. But one can well imagine a Bloomian account of Yeats's anxiety under the pressure of his great predecessor's example. After "Easter 1916", the genre was no longer quite the same.

Stylistically, Yeats's poem has even greater variety than "The Charge of the Light Brigade". The first ten lines or so are decidedly low-key -- one cannot help thinking of Joyce's *Dubliners* -- whereas the last ten or

so lines are in an altogether higher style, almost chant-like, and the central passage about the stone in the midst of the stream belongs to yet a third, symbolist mode. The length, too, may create a slightly surprising new option, being neither exactly long nor exactly short. But a greater surprise is in the matter of narration. Not only are both the generalizing and individualizing alternatives rejected. There is actually no narration of the heroic action at all: a putatively obligatory feature is quite missing. The opening lines seem like the beginning of a story, and the closing lines seem like a retrospective comment on a story. But instead of an explicit narrative middle, there is only a series of epitaphs on particular rebels, and somewhat puzzling ones at that: they are not altogether flattering, and with every passing year their precise historical reference becomes more cryptic. Maybe the rebels' brave actions were associated with scenes that to Yeats's taste were too urban and bourgeois -- the taking of the Post Office, after all! Yet the narrative gap also connects with other generic innovations. The pronouns of the story-like beginning and end include the second person singular and plural: the strategy throughout is to foreground *responses* to events rather than the events themselves. For, and this was the positively shocking innovation, the response is troubled and ambivalent; the value of the heroism is questioned; and the beauty is a terrible one. So complex, in fact, are the feelings expressed that -- in the symbolistic passage -- even plain

statement is cast aside.

I say shocking. But of course Yeats's poem is much less shocking for us now than for its first readers (cf. Sell forthcoming (b)). Yeats was coming to the same conclusions about patriotic fervour as some of the poets who were being killed in the trenches of France. His poem falls into place beside Owen's "Dulce et decorum est", and both of them thereby seem the more natural. We are not the first audience. In a sense we steal Yeats's poem, and misuse it. The editors of anthologies may annotate it for us. But in our own way we should manage in any case, and the poem would become less and less about the particular martyrs and more and more about martyrdom in general. With the uncanny eye to immortality of a great artist, Yeats foresaw this trend towards universalization, and especially in the symbolist passage. So even an occasional poem could be functional both for an age and for all time. And even a piece of symbolist writing could have force at the particular moment of history. Not least because the two were generically merged.

But our creation of new meanings and functions is not reserved for the obsolete genres or texts of literature, and this is one reason why I hope that socio-semioticians will be interested in the questions I am posing. All the time, we are "overhearing": we are processing language which was not directly intended for our ears or our eyes. Furthermore, the

allegorical readings of ancient and biblical texts proposed by mediaeval scholars are only the most obvious illustration of a basic fact of life: expressive intent and receptive processing are seldom perfectly parallel. It is not only *literary* genres that have lost their locus in life or become subject to modulation. Many young couples today do not have a traditional wedding service, or omit some of the old promises. And in a supermarket, you don't often ask about the availability of goods.

Happily, what goes on at congresses of socio-semioticians is not so impersonal. So let me complete my initiating move: "Can you help me, please?"

9. Postscript, 1991

Now that this paper is going to published, it will perhaps elicit some written response from the Hallidayan community. In the meantime, I gratefully record the kindness with which my questions were received by participants in the Helsinki Congress, and the helpfulness of their answers and suggestions. For many socio-semioticians, the concern with genre is indeed as central as I had begun to realize. Michael Gregory (1988), Jay L. Lemke (1987), James R. Martin (forthcoming), Terry Threadgold (1989), and Tony Bex (forthcoming) have all done work which must be taken into account. Bex writes specifically about literary genres, and

Threadgold's analysis of the ideological dimensions of genre is strongly rooted in history. Recent work by other Hallidayans tends to confirm that their interest in history is becoming ever stronger (see e.g. Birch and O'Toole 1988, and the review article on this by Sell (forthcoming (c))).

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